

APPENDIX

The Role of UNICEF and WHO

The 20th Century will be chiefly remembered in future centuries not as an age of political conflicts or technical inventions, but as an age in which human society dared to think of the welfare of the whole human race as a practical objective.

—Arnold Toynbee, quoted in UNICEF’s 1995 *The State of the World’s Children* report (p. 54)

On reviewing an early draft of this book, several readers expressed uncertainty about the authors’ perception of UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO). They asked us whether we believe these United Nations agencies play a positive or negative role in terms of working toward the structural changes that are a prerequisite for meaningful and lasting improvements in health. And how important do we consider these agencies’ role to be? In answer to such queries, we would like to clarify where our view.

Although we are sometimes critical of UNICEF and WHO, we recognize that both agencies have made important contributions to world health, especially for those in greatest need. Both agencies have many dedicated, highly qualified, and caring people on their staffs. The initiatives they have spearheaded have saved millions of lives, at least temporarily.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution made by WHO and UNICEF has been to help win acceptance of the relatively new perception that *health is a basic human right* and to promote the idealistic goal of *Health for All*. The conceptualization of *Primary Health Care*—as a comprehensive approach for meeting the health needs of all people through participatory, equity-building action—was a great step forward. Persuading the world’s governments to endorse such a potentially revolutionary approach, at least on paper (in the Alma Ata Declaration), was an extraordinary achievement.

Had they received more support from progressives, however, and less interference from conservatives, and had they listened more to grassroots organizations and popular movements for social change, UNICEF and WHO could perhaps have done much better. It is unfortunate that they have not stood up more firmly to pressure from governments, wealthy elites, and multinational corporations.

As we have discussed in this book, UNICEF and WHO have not realized many of the goals they have set. Indeed,

the earlier, more ambitious goals now appear more distant than ever. Especially in the poorest nations and communities, *many of the gains achieved through narrowly focused health technologies have been offset by regressive social trends*, cutbacks in public services, and a widening income disparity between rich and poor.

The globalized growth-oriented free-market development paradigm of the last decades has posed formidable obstacles to the progressive social changes some UNICEF and WHO policymakers have sought to promote. One high UNICEF official acknowledges that his agency is “bound and gagged.”¹ There are several reasons for this.

First, most UNICEF and WHO funding comes from rich countries in the North. It is hardly surprising that the agencies more inclined to lick than bite the hand that feeds them. The United States government—which provides roughly one quarter of UNICEF’s and WHO’s operational budgets—has repeatedly threatened to slash its contribution if the agencies *become too political*: that is, if they defend the interests of the poor when they conflict with those of big business, or if they call too emphatically for the macro-economic changes needed to reduce poverty and thus achieve lasting health gains.² The executives of the UN organizations know such threats are real. They remember what happened to UNESCO (from which the US completely withdrew its funding in 1984).

Both UNICEF and WHO have been repeatedly warned, and occasionally disciplined through reduced or delayed funding, for not toeing the line dictated by the United States.³ In Part 3, we saw how the US government used threats of funding cuts and other sanctions to obstruct efforts by UNICEF and WHO to regulate and curtail the health-threatening marketing practices of transnational corporations. The examples we cited involve breast milk substitutes and irrational drugs. But, as many UN policymakers have discovered, the US government is quick to attack any national or international initiative that attempts to restrict or even question the freedom of the global market to place profit before people.

To some extent, the actions of UNICEF and WHO are further constrained by Third World governments. The agencies fear that if they are overly critical of a host country's policies, that government will retaliate by shutting down their local field offices.⁴

Transnational corporations also exert indirect pressure on UN agencies by lobbying government officials. More directly, some corporations that are notorious for unscrupulous marketing practices have made substantial donations to relevant UN programs (see pages 96–98). Although the parties concerned strongly deny it, at times such “collaboration” may influence the formulation and implementation of health strategies in ways that favor big business at the expense of children's well-being.

On a more basic level, UNICEF and WHO, like other UN agencies, represent different nations' governments, not their people (at least not directly). Unfortunately, most governments—including those in most Third World countries—are in large part controlled by a privileged elite class of people. These governments tend to resist health and development initiatives that work seriously toward a fairer distribution of resources and decisionmaking power.

On the most fundamental level of all, UNICEF and WHO are constrained in their advocacy for the poor by the fact that they themselves are part of the dominant power structure. One indication of this is the fact that many top officials in these organizations previously held high-level posts either in governments of dominant First World countries or in giant corporations. The current Directors General of both WHO and UNICEF represent two of the world's most wealthy and powerful nations, Japan and the United States. Both officials were appointed following pressure campaigns by their respective governments, in spite of angry protests by less powerful states and non-government organizations in both the North and South.

For a combination of reasons, as mentioned above, UNICEF and WHO have often followed the path of least resistance. Unable to effectively implement their muted call for a more equitable social and economic world order, they tend to embrace stopgap technological interventions as a way to limit the harm done by the present unjust world order—without radically changing that order or offending its dominant interests.

During the 1980s, UNICEF painstakingly (though cautiously) documented the deadly toll that economic recession, the debt crisis, structural adjustment, and resultant deepening poverty were taking on the health and lives of Third World children. But instead of vigorously protesting against this situation and calling for sweeping changes in the unfair global economic system, UNICEF tacitly accepted the “adverse economic climate” as an unalterable fact of life. Accordingly, it called for “ad-

justment with a human face.”⁵ This strategy, which in essence amounts to damage control to ameliorate unfair policies, has been partially adopted by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. It seeks to provide safety nets to protect vulnerable groups from the most devastating effects of structural adjustment.

In keeping with this compromise, as we saw in Chapter 4, UNICEF also “adjusted” its own strategy for reducing child death rates. Sidestepping the politically progressive challenge of comprehensive primary health care, it narrowed its focus to a few “cost-effective” interventions that debtor countries could afford within the harsh constraints of economic transition and structural adjustment. This strategy, although politically expedient within the context of the conservative socio-political climate of the last decade, failed to effectively address the root causes of poor health. As the distribution of wealth and resources worldwide became less equitably distributed than ever, child mortality and morbidity rates among the growing underclass, especially in the Third World, remained unacceptably high... and in some cases actually rose.

We can criticize UNICEF and WHO for having compromised their goal of “Health for All through Comprehensive Primary Health Care.” But we should not write these agencies off as hopelessly co-opted. The constraints they operate under, while formidable, are not insurmountable. This is demonstrated by the important, sometimes courageous stands that both agencies have on occasion taken in defense of the disadvantaged.

For example, in its 1989 report on *The State of the World's Children*, as in many of its reports and analyses since then, UNICEF acknowledged that the technological interventions of the Child Survival Revolution are inadequate to offset the devastating impact of the debt crisis, structural adjustment, and the widening gap between rich and poor.⁶ UNICEF has repeatedly called for effective debt relief.⁷ It has urged policymakers to discard today's counterproductive, top-down development policies in favor of more egalitarian, ecologically viable strategies that it calls “real development.”⁸

However, throughout the 1980s and the early 1990s, UNICEF failed to follow through on its call for *real development* (which it now calls “sustainable development”) by rethinking its own strategy for reducing child mortality. Although it acknowledges the social determinants of ill-health, it has been slow in returning to the more comprehensive, more liberating, and more socially equalizing approach embraced in the Alma Ata Declaration. In practice, both UNICEF and WHO have usually been hesitant to challenge the status quo. This is hardly surprising, given the monumental constraints they face.

Encouragingly, UNICEF's 1995 *The State of the World's Children* report in some ways appears to be taking a more outspoken stand against the dominant development model and in favor of fairer, more equitable and participatory social structures.⁹ The report cites numerous stark examples of growing inequity and social injustice, and traces these trends' devastating impact on children's health. These examples include the following:

- In Latin America today, fewer than 10% of landowners own almost 90% of the land.... In Africa, it is increasingly the case that most productive lands are devoted to export agriculture while the lands of the poor majority are of lesser quality, receive less investment, and are rapidly becoming degraded and depleted. (p. 43)
- In much of Asia, 50% of government educational spending is devoted to the best educated 10% (p. 45)
- Most countries could go a long way towards the meeting of basic needs by a fairer allocation of existing social expenditures. In Indonesia, for example, government spending on the richest 10% amounts to 3 times more than on the poorest 10%. (p. 45)
- Only about 25% of today's aid goes to the countries where the world's poorest billion people now live. (p. 46)
- For two decades, military spending in the developing world has grown more than twice as fast as per capita incomes... (p. 46)
- In the wars of the last decade far more children than soldiers have been killed and disabled. Over that period, approximately 2 million children have died in wars, between 4 and 5 million have been physically disabled, more than 5 million have been forced into refugee camps, and more than 12 million have been left homeless. (p. 2)
- In the last 10 years ... falling commodity prices, rising military expenditures, poor returns on investment, the debt crisis, and structural adjustment programs have reduced the real incomes of approximately 800 million people in some 40 developing countries.... At the same time, cuts in essential social services have meant health centres without drugs and doctors, schools without books and teachers, family planning services without staff and supplies. (p. 2)
- Internationally, inequality has now reached monstrous proportions. Overall, the richest fifth of the world now

has about 85% of the world's GNP. (p. 44) Meanwhile, the poorest 40 or 50 countries have seen their share of the world income decline to the point where a fifth of the world's people now share less than 1.5% of world income. (p. 3)

- This tendency is not confined to the developing world ... During the decade of the 1980s, for example, 4 million more American children fell below the official poverty line even as average incomes rose... by 25%. (p. 3)
- The United States spends \$25 billion a year on its prison services alone. (p. 59)
- The total cost of providing basic social services in the developing countries, including health, education, family planning, clean water... would be an additional \$30 billion to \$40 billion a year... The world spends more than this on playing golf. (p. 59)
- The poor remain poor principally because they are under-represented in political and economic decisions. (p. 47)

In addition to critiquing the regressive thrust of the dominant free market approach to development, UNICEF's 1995 report also calls for regulatory measures to contain the damage it is doing to the health of Third World communities (although the report carefully avoids using the term *regulation*, which is currently in disfavor among elites in the US and elsewhere). For instance, the report notes that:

- In recent commitment to free market economic policies, insufficient account has been taken of the effects on the poor, on the vulnerable, or on the environment. (p. 40)
- In too many countries economic policy is acting as a kind of reverse shock absorber, ensuring that the poor suffer first and most in bad times and gain last and least in good times. Economic development of this kind ... screws the poor even more tightly to their poverty. (p. 44)
- The problem of the economic marginalization of the poorest nations, and of the poorest people within nations, must be confronted. No social progress can be sustained ... if social and economic exclusion continues to be the chief characteristic of national and global economic systems. (p. 43)
- Free market economic policies have shown that they are successful in short term creation of wealth.

Governments now have the responsibility to harness that power to the cause of sustainable development. In particular, they have a responsibility to counterbalance the inbuilt tendency of free-market economic systems to favour the already advantaged. (p. 43)

In the report, UNICEF argues that “fundamental change is necessary” for sustainable development, and that “the problems of discrimination, landlessness, and unemployment must be addressed by land reform, restructuring of government expenditures in favour of the poor, reduction of military expenditures, and considerable increases in the resources available for environmentally sustainable development.” (p. 43) However, the report acknowledges that “the way forward is obstructed by political and economic vested interests.” (p. 43)

UNICEF’s 1995 report strongly emphasizes the importance of “people’s involvement in the struggle for change” (p. 56) and notes that social progress “is brought about less by governments than by people’s movements, by a people-led sea change in public perceptions of what is and is not acceptable in human affairs—and by a corresponding change in the perception of democratic political leaders as to what constitutes good politics” (p. 56). The report goes on to state that: “It is, above all, the power of concerned and committed people, and their organizations, that can bring what needs to be done within the bounds of what can be done” (p. 56). “No longer are people willing to accept that societies should be so organized that progress, knowledge, and rights should remain the monopoly of the few.” (p. 57)

Despite this progressive rhetoric, however, it would be premature to conclude that UNICEF is out from under the thumb of the global power structure. Although in one breath the report criticizes the inequities of the free market system, in the next it speaks enthusiastically of the “development consensus” reached at the 1995 World Summit on Social Development (Social Summit) in Copenhagen. There is a broad consensus, it says, that “the way forward lies along the path of democratic politics and *market-friendly economics*; of meeting human needs and investing in human capital.” (Italics added.) (p. 5)

UNICEF’s view-point and language are disturbingly similar to those of the World Bank, whose monetarist global perspective permeated the official Social Summit. There may have been more or less of a consensus on the “way forward” among the high-level officials behind the closed doors of the official summit. However, the official “Declaration and Plan of Action” was strongly criticized by the grassroots delegates attending the separate NGO Forum at the Social Summit, which accused the official

assembly of “addressing the symptoms of [humanity’s major] problems without challenging the policies that have helped create them,”¹⁰ and of subscribing to “a declaration that—despite progressive rhetoric—promises only a continuation of the neoliberal policies that many of us have come to see as the core of the problem.”¹¹ A group of over 600 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), grassroots coalitions, and popular movements represented at the NGO Forum drafted and signed an “Alternative Copenhagen Declaration” which attacks the current world economic order as untenable and demands a dramatic change of course. The following passages are abstracted from the Alternative Declaration:

We expected that the Social Summit would address the structural causes of poverty, unemployment and social disintegration, as well as environmental degradation, and would place people at the center of the development process.... While some progress was achieved in placing critical issues on the table during the Summit, we believe that the economic framework adopted in the [official declaration] is in basic contradiction with the objectives of equitable and sustainable social development. The over-reliance that the document places on unaccountable “open, free-market forces” as a basis for organizing national and international economies aggravates, rather than alleviates, the current global social crises....

This system has resulted in an even greater concentration of power and control over food and other critical resources in the hands of relatively few transnational corporations and financial institutions. It creates incentives for capital to externalize social and environmental costs. It generates jobless growth, derogates the rights of workers, and . . . leads to an unequal distribution of resources between and within countries. . . .

We, representatives of civil society, call upon governments and political leaders to recognize that the existing system has opened the most dangerous chasm in human history between an affluent, over-consuming minority and an impoverished majority of humankind in the South and also, increasingly, in the North.

In rejecting the prevailing global economic model, we do not suggest the imposition of another universal model. Rather, it is a question of innovating and devising local answers to community needs, promoting the skills and energy of women in full equality with men, and benefitting from valuable traditions, as well as new technologies.¹²

As these excerpts from the Alternative Copenhagen Declaration make clear, the so-called “development consensus” arrived at in the official Declaration was a “consensus” that excluded input from disadvantaged people and their spokespersons.

The World Bank—which played a key role in the Social Summit—has perfected the art of doublespeak. With a tone of moral authority, it speaks convincingly of giving “top priority to elimination of poverty,” while further entrenching policies that widen the gap between rich and poor. The 1995 UNICEF report is similar. While it describes in heart-rending detail the marginalization and poverty caused by the free market system, in apparent sincerity it quotes the World Bank’s misleading refrain that “health conditions across the world have improved more in the past 40 years than in all of previous human history.”¹³

At no point in its social analysis does UNICEF’s 1995 Report point to the lethal contradictions in the World Bank’s global plan for *Investing in Health* (see p. 103). Nor does it even mention that the Bank—whose health strategies it appears to endorse—is the driving force behind the structural adjustment programs, the deregulation of the free market, and the global “monopoly of the few,” all of which UNICEF correctly identifies as obstacles to achieving health gains.

UNICEF’s 1995 Report merits careful analysis. On the one hand, its celebration of “the people” rather than governments as the main actors in sustainable development sounds empowering and progressive. But, on the other hand, its downplaying of the importance of government in the development process carries an odor of the current World Bank dogma. It fits comfortably into the neo-liberal design to down-scale government and strengthen the private sector. The language is, of course, somewhat different from that of the Bank. Whereas UNICEF speaks of “the people” as the impetus for sustainable development, mainstream economists now glorify and distort the term “civil society”—by which they mean nongovernmental groups and organizations, including (predominantly, one soon discovers) private industry and transnational corporations. Once again, we discover the wolf in sheep’s clothing: the rhetoric of “power to the people” cloaking the bid to give profit-hungry big business yet more of an upper hand.

By no means do we mean to imply that UNICEF is as disingenuous or firmly in the corner of the privileged as the World Bank. Far from it! UNICEF’s commitment to defend the health and rights of disadvantaged people is, no doubt, sincere. However, UNICEF’s bold talk of leadership by the people rather than government is

tolerated because, paradoxically, such an assertion reinforces the dominant laissez-faire view of the global lords. This is the view that government spending and control should be drastically reduced (including public services, proportionate taxation, and regulation of private enterprise) and that “civil society” (i.e. primarily big business) should take over the helm of national and global development. By similar reasoning, when the World Bank speaks of “encouraging self reliance at the family level,” what it really means is *cutting back on government spending for the needy and cost sharing* (making the poor pay for health care, education, and other services that used to be significantly contributed to, through progressive taxation, by the rich).

Today’s problems are complex. At present (1996) the conservative Republican-controlled Congress in Washington is determined to roll back the socially progressive legislation of the last half century. It is also strongly critical of the United Nations in general, claiming that it is bureaucratic and inefficient. (In short, it fears the UN as a threat to the unbridled globalization of the free market.) Proposals to cut back on US funding for several UN agencies are being seriously considered.

Paradoxically, an effort by the conservative US Congress to sabotage the UN by withdrawing its funding might prove to be a blessing in disguise. The budget short-fall, of course, would be worrisome to many United Nations personnel, whose high salaries depend on the US dollar. But in the long run, the distancing of the United States from the UN might be a god-send for the world’s disadvantaged people. For if the US withdraws its predominant financial support of UN organizations, it will also—we must hope—lose some of its disproportionate control. For this reason and others, we must encourage UNICEF and WHO to courageously stand up to the crushing inequities of today’s neo-colonial development model, which is jeopardizing the well-being both of the Earth and its people.

UNICEF is, of course, correct in asserting that momentum for progress toward a more democratic, equitable world must come from the bottom up. More than ever, it is vitally important that *all of us who are concerned about the health of the world’s children actively support and maintain constant, friendly pressure upon UNICEF and WHO*. We must strongly support and defend these agencies when they take a stand on behalf of the disadvantaged, when they dare to call attention to and attack the structural injustice that underlies poverty, underdevelopment and poor health. And we must offer firm but constructive criticism when UNICEF and WHO retreat from their ideals under the browbeating of the powerful.

At the same time, we must be realistic. UNICEF, WHO, and other bodies of the United Nations have a valuable role to play as allies of grassroots movements in the struggle to achieve “health for all.” However, because of their inherent structural limitations and ties to the global power structure, we clearly cannot count on these or other UN agencies to be decisive leaders in the struggle for equitable social change. As UNICEF itself points out, only grassroots organizations and popular movements can realistically be expected to play that leading role.

Ultimately, each of us who has a deep concern for the well being of others has a role to play. Stressing this point, UNICEF’S 1995 *State of the World’s Children* report quotes Martin Luther King Jr.:

Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Even a superficial look at history reveals that no social advance rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. Every step toward the goals of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and the tireless exertions of dedicated individuals.

Endnotes: Appendix

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- 1 Roger Sawyer, *Children Enslaved* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 178. Cited in Kent, p. 184.
 - 2 For example, in 1989 the Bush Administration threatened to cut off US funding of WHO if that agency accepted the recently proclaimed Palestinian state as a member. "Baker Urges Cutting Off of Funds if UN Agencies Upgrade PLO," *New York Times*, May 2, 1989, p. A6.
 - 3 For example, in 1984, the Reagan Administration halted US funding of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) because the agency had become too "political". Graham Hancock, *Lords of Poverty: The Power, Prestige, and Corruption of the International Aid Business*, p. 49; William Preston Jr., *Hope and Folly: The United States and UNESCO 1945–1985* (University of Minnesota Press) 1989, p. 10.
 - 4 George Kent, *The Politics of Children's Survival* (London: Praeger, 1991), p. 185.
 - 5 See, for example, UNICEF, *Within Human Reach: A Future for Africa's Children* (New York: UNICEF, 1985), p. 64; Giovanni Andrea Cornia, Richard Jolly, and Frances Stewart, eds., *Adjustment with a Human Face: Protecting the Vulnerable and Promoting Growth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), Vol. I, p. 2.
 - 6 UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children, 1989*, pp. 1–28.
 - 7 UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children, 1989*, pp. 21, 23.
 - 8 UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children, 1989*, p. 34.
 - 9 UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children, 1995*.
 - 10 From a statement issued by *50 Years is Enough* (a coalition opposing the policies of the World Bank and IMF) at the Global Summit in Copenhagen, March, 1995.
 - 11 From a statement by Peggy Antrobus, General Coordinator of Development Alternatives for Women for a New Era (DAWN), circulated at the Social Summit in Copenhagen, March, 1995.
 - 12 From the Copenhagen Alternative Declaration as drafted by the NGO Forum during the Social Summit of March, 1995.
 - 13 UNICEF, *State of the World's Children Report, 1995*, p. 54.